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LAOS:

THE 'PROFILE' LEAPS TO VIEW

ELIZABETH MARTINEZ

Miss Martinez (Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez) is editor of El Grito del Norte, *a newspaper of the Chicano movement, published in northern New Mexico. She is the author of a book on Cuba,* The Youngest Revolution *(Dial Press), and editor of* Letters from Mississippi *(McGraw-Hill).*

The Settha Palace Hotel in Vientiane, capital of Laos, is a strange hodgepodge of colonialisms and cultures. Parked in the entrance driveway between well-kept lawns stands a white Triumph convertible, its top down and red leather seats gleaming. The dark paneled walls behind the hotel's front desk are decorated with old KLM posters; at the desk itself stand one or two polite young clerks of Indian origin; the air-conditioned bar offers Muzak pop tunes in French, Spanish and English; the restaurant is called a Rathskeller and serves pizza. Laos is almost nowhere to be found.

As for the clientele, the hotel at first seems to have very few guests, but slowly more begin to be noticeable, very early in the morning and after dusk. They are all of a kind: stocky, crew-cut, blond and blue-eyed American men in their 30s or early 40s, keeping very much to themselves, without women or children. They are, it turns out, pilots for Air America. And it is the American colonial presence which dominates in Laos above all.

Like other Americans in the country in April 1970, the pilots were trying to keep what this Administration's jargon calls "a low profile." But that month, the profile leaped into view. The secret war being waged by the United States against the Lao people, the war in which Air America plays a key part, was no longer a secret. From the release of testimony given in hearings of a Senate subcommittee last fall, the folks at home learned that the United States had been waging war in Laos since 1962; that it was costing taxpayers some billions of dollars a year; that U.S. pilots were carrying out as well as directing bombing raids against almost exclusively civilian victims, with the U.S. Ambassador in Laos approving in advance each target selected.

But the impact of that information was not felt at the time in the United States. Key sections of the testimony were deleted from the version released, and then the invasion of Cambodia followed so quickly that Laos became dimmed from view. But in a long-range way, those revelations in the Senate may have been more important than the Cambodian action. For the "nonwar" in Laos suggests a pattern that the United States may follow—in Latin America, Africa, wherever—more often than it does the direct involvement of American ground troops, as in Vietnam and Cambodia. It has the huge advantage of costing only American dollars—and very few American lives—so that no storm of protest is likely to mount.

The Senate subcommittee testimony, together with information gathered elsewhere, forms a picture of one of the most inhuman and senseless adventures in American foreign policy to date. It appears, for example, that bombings of Lao civilians increased immensely after the air attack in North Vietnam halted in November 1968. Why? "Well," the U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission has told a journalist, "we had all those planes sitting around and couldn't just let them stay there with nothing to do."

U.S. presence in Laos, like its presence throughout Indochina, began before the French were finally defeated and left in 1954; after that year, however, it grew quickly. Laos was never considered a prize plum of the French empire, as can be seen by the neglect of Vientiane—a small, carelessly laid-out town with none of the broad avenues, massive stone buildings and pretty parks that the French put down in such favored centers as Hanoi. Though Laos exports wood and tin, it has never been plundered in the classic colonial way; the importance of the country to the imperialists has been mainly as a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam.

Laos is a nation of hungry peasants, but land is not the central point of popular discontent—only about 20 per cent of it is in the hands of big landowners. The ruling class is supported by trade and royal lineage—the commercial interests being tied first to the French and now to the Americans. Import duties are the main source of national income—and plenty of personal income, too. Corruption, nepotism, favoritism and abuse of power by the military were until recently the main grievances in town and country—Vientiane is said to have more whorehouses and opium dens than it has schools and hospitals combined. But during the past decade, a new factor in the oppression of the Lao people has been added: the American bombings.

The 1962 Geneva Accords recognized for Laos a coalition government of Right, Center and Left. The Pathet Lao (meaning "nation of the Lao") as the revolutionary forces are commonly called, were given four seats in the cabinet and the right-wing clique of royal, military and commercial elements another four seats. The balance of power lay originally with a group of "neutralists," but it soon lost all importance as the United States threw its support to the Right.

From 1964 to 1968, the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao fought for control, with power swinging back and forth several times. About 40 per cent of the country came under Pathet Lao control. It was for the purpose of supporting U.S. forces in Vietnam and of keeping as much Lao territory as possible under its influence that the United States began to build up its military power and institutionalize its civil role in Laos. The Ho Chi Minh Trail (a narrow supply route running through southeastern Laos to the National Liberation Forces in South Vietnam) and the supposed presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos served as excuses. But if there are such troops in Laos, President Nixon and other officials have at least quadrupled their numbers. Non-Communist observers estimate perhaps 5,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos—Nixon, in his March 1970 statement on Laos, said 67,000. Not only did he far exceed the estimates of even the U.S. military attachés

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